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## THE EVOLUTION OF THE NATIONAL POLITICAL CONVENTION

The time is rapidly approaching when the great political parties in the United States will be called upon to nominate their candidates for the Presidency. After a period of nearly a century and a quarter the American political system has been reduced to a science which far surpasses that to be found in any other country in the world. The parties hold their conventions and nominate their candidates without the least friction and as though it were a matter of natural consequence. The origin and development of the convention in national politics was not instantaneous. The evolution was of slow growth and at times intricate and difficult to understand.

The present system of party conventions, with slight modifications, has been in vogue since 1836. But before we can fully understand the causes which called the convention into existence it will be necessary to go back to the very inception of the government and scan its workings during the early years of the Republic.

It is obvious that no convention was necessary when the time arrived for the selection of the first president. The name of Washington was upon every lip. His election was unanimous. There were no parties. The war had left the patriots united. But after very few years new issues arose and party lines were soon drawn. The anti-Federalists sprang into being. When the election of 1796 approached, a conference of the Federal members in Congress met and nominated John Adams for the Presidency. This was the inception of what was later designated as "King Caucus." In other words, it was the method by which the Senators and Representatives in Congress placed in nomination a candidate who posed as the representative of the dominant party. Perhaps this was the best method for the time being. As there were no railroads and no telegraphic communication, a national convention, as we understand it to-day, was out of the question. But with better transportation facilities it became both possible and expedient.

Under the original system there were no opposing party candidates. The person receiving the highest number of votes in the electoral college became President and the one receiving the next highest became Vice-President. That this was a dangerous method, however, was soon to be learned. Few elections have been waged with as much spirit or concealed such far-reaching consequences as that of 1800. Yet at the outset there was no such intention that such should be the result. Jefferson and Burr each received seventy-three votes in the electoral college. It had been universally understood that the former should be President, the latter Vice-President. But there arose a case that brought to light the weakness of the system. The election was disputed. Neither the one nor the other could legally claim the Presidential office. The contest was therefore thrown into the House of Representatives. After a few ballots had been taken it was seen that the contest was to be unusually spirited. The door was opened to chicanery and trickery. Jefferson was an anti-Federalist. Adams had been a Federalist. Burr, while professing to belong to the former party, had not become so affixed to it that he could not or would not "flop" if he thought that anything were to be gained for himself. When the Federalists saw that they would be unable to return Adams to power they began to throw their influence to Burr. While the balloting was going on in the House of Representatives, negotiations were being held between the Federalists and the friends of Burr. Had the latter agreed to conduct the office as a Federalist, Burr and not Jefferson would have been elected to the Presidency. It is not believed that it was a case where conscience prevented the acceptance but rather a shortsightedness on the part of Burr. But it was not too late even then to obtain the coveted goal. "By deceiving one man, a great blockhead, and by tempting two, not incorruptible, he might have secured a majority of the States," said James A. Bayard, then representative from Delaware, in his report of the election to Hamilton. However, Burr failed to take advantage of his opportunity and Jefferson was elected on the thirty-sixth ballot by a vote of fifty-five to forty-nine. It was a narrow escape for the American system. The election of Burr would have been a national calamity. The

contest taught its lesson. It was vividly shown how, under the prevailing system, an inferior man could become President. Immediately a movement was set on foot and in due course of time a Constitutional amendment was passed which provided that the offices of President and Vice-President should be voted for separately.

The system of "King Caucus" nominations continued in vogue until 1824. At times objections had been heard, but no better system had been proposed as a substitute. Under the administrations of Presidents Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe — the Virginia dynasty as it was called — the country prospered to such an extent that the period was known as the "era of good feeling." But by 1824 a change of feeling was manifest. A younger generation had forced itself into prominence. Monroe preferred the candidacy of William H. Crawford, who was then Secretary of the Treasury. He accordingly became the nominee of "King Caucus." But the "King Caucus" that had nominated the preceding Presidents had lost much of its enthusiasm and influence. At first there were nearly a score of candidates in the field. Soon the list was reduced to six candidates, viz., Crawford, Jackson, J. Q. Adams, Clay, Calhoun, and DeWitt Clinton. The latter two withdrew and a spirited contest began. The strong opposition to the "King Caucus" weakened the candidacy of Crawford. But the real surprise of the day was the growing popularity of Andrew Jackson, who obtained a larger popular and electoral vote than any other candidates. It was early seen, however, that no election was possible, and the contest was transferred to the House of Representatives, with the result that Adams was elected. But the important incident of the campaign was the defeat of "King Caucus." Never again was the system resorted to as a medium for placing in nomination candidates for the Presidency.

Nomination by the State Legislatures became the temporary makeshift which superseded the "King Caucus." The former was inferior to the latter and was not destined to have a long life. The development of national progress and the spirit of the newer politics demanded a system more representative than either. The younger Adams and Jackson

were the only Presidents to be nominated directly by the Legislatures.

The convention system as we understand it to-day is derived from the prototype of the delegate State convention. Its germ was found in Pennsylvania during the Republican factional fights between 1799 and 1808. It was at first a result of accidental necessity, crude in form, but altogether a useful and efficient instrument. It was early adopted in New York and soon found its way into other States. It had become an ordinary means of concentrating and organizing party action in the States before it was adapted to national politics. The first suggestion came from the Democrats of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, in 1824.

Although defective in minor points, the national convention echoes accurately the voice of the party. It is true that it does not always select the foremost men in the party, but that is the fault of the party, not the convention. The national convention is generally more or less under the control of the administration, but it should be entirely free from such control.

The nominating convention is neither a part of our political heritage from England nor an early product of the new institutions that resulted from the Constitution. The idea of the framers of this greatest of all documents, viz., that the electors should express their own individual preferences and judgment was soon found to be impracticable, rendered so by the provision that the vote be taken separately in each State. Only by previous agreement could a concensus of opinion be concentrated upon the intended candidates.

At first, the Senators and Representatives in Congress alone knew the best men qualified for the high office of president. But they were by the Constitution excluded from being electors. Hence it was not strange that "King Caucus" should spring into being. This Congressional caucus at first was more than a pardonable device for concentrating public opinion; it was an instrument without which the party success of a great majority of the people would have been impossible. Yet the Congressional caucus outlived its usefulness. That was when national issues outweighed local affairs and the people at large became

acquainted with the character and ability of our public men. The congressmen had been selected for a different purpose than the making of presidents and when they disregarded the will of the people the revolt came immediately.

Thus it will be seen that the national political convention as it now exists is the best and only practicable system by which the parties can place their candidates before the people and the people at the same time have a voice in the expression of sentiment as to whom those candidates shall be. Yet there was nothing in the Constitution which provided for such a method. It was the sheer result of necessity. The parties could not exist in their present efficiency without a central authority. This extra-Constitutional and extra-legal institution supplements the electoral system in such a way as to realize and make effectual the plans and purposes of the framers of the Constitution.

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